Johnson Team Named Winner in Acara Challenge

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Four Cornell graduate student entrepreneurs win $5,000 for business idea to improve food safety in India

A student team from Johnson’s “Creative Design for Affordability” class was one of four winners of the 2011 Acara Challenge. The competition is sponsored by Institute on the Environment’s Acara program, and invites international student teams to learn about and develop social businesses. The winners receive $5,000, plus tuition to attend the Acara Summer Institute in Bangalore, India, this summer, where they will move their proposed businesses from plan to action.

This year’s Acara Challenge required students to address a problem related to food and water security. Poor nutrition, lack of enough food or water, wasteful practices, poor infrastructure, and poor market information all contribute to lack of food or water security.

The winning Johnson team partnered with the K. J. Somaiya Institute of Management Studies and Research (SIMSR) in India to generate ideas for products and processes that can increase food safety in India. “Swach,” proposed by Katy Maffei, MBA’11, Kirtana Raja, MBA’11, Leslie Mignin, M.Arch. ‘11, Tamara Struk, MPA’12, and four team members from India will provide food-safety testing kits and establish an auditing process to ensure the hygiene of the government-supported mid-day meal, served to school children throughout India.

“Through this project we learned how to design a business that profitably addresses a real social need in the world—in other words, how to be social entrepreneurs,” said team member Katy Maffie. “It’s a great feeling to know that a business you created could actually help address child health and nutrition in a meaningful way.”

A second Johnson team earned an “honorable mention” in the competition for its “Prosperity Cart” idea. Cornell students Chris Walsh, MBA’11, Anne Laure Robine, MBA’11, Claudia Mei, ’11, and Aleksandra Janjic, MPA’12, and four team members from India, proposed a durable, long-lasting, state-of-the art food cart for street vendors that will minimize food’s exposure to dust and germs.

Team members were enrolled in Johnson’s Creative Design for Affordability, a 3-credit, full semester project-based course. The class uses product design to help students become more aware of their creativity and prepares them to lead or facilitate creative teams in their future careers as managers. Johnson students were paired with students in India for the Acara Challenge. Using ethnographic techniques, each team was required to identify a need, design a solution, and create a viable business plan to address food security in an economically disadvantaged area in India. Each team created short videos to illustrate the need their projects would address. The videos for both Swach and Prosperity Cart are available online.

Johnson’s Center for Sustainable Global Enterprise received a Course and Program grant from National Collegiate Inventors and Innovators Alliance (NCIIA) in fall of 2010 to significantly enhance and institutionalize this new collaborative class that helps students conceptualize and develop new businesses that address global societal challenges.

Acara, a program of the University of Minnesota’s Institute on the Environment, seeks to catalyze social entrepreneurship and create a new generation of global leaders by mentoring university students. The Acara Challenge is supported by Institute on the Environment, College of Science and Engineering, University of Minnesota, 3M, Honeywell, and the National Collegiate Inventors and Innovators Alliance (NCIIA).
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